

The Scriptures of the Early Church

The Earliest Christian Scriptures – are simply the Jewish “Law and the Prophets”

- But they are now interpreted in the light of Christ
 - The Scriptures mystically reveal who Jesus Christ is
 - Thus, the Nicene Creed’s “and rose again according to the Scriptures” means “just as the Old Testament prophesied,” not “like the gospels say”
 - The Scriptures are a “treasury of images” which reveal Christ
 - E.g. Abel’s acceptable sacrifice and murder, Enoch’s ascension, Noah’s “baptism,” Isaac “sacrificed,” etc.
 - The Scriptures must be interpreted according to the Christian “rule of faith”
 - The rule of faith is external to the Scriptures, but it is referenced in many ways in early Christian writings – “the teaching,” “the teaching of Christ” (2 Jn 1.9), “the sound teaching” (Tit 2.1), “the tradition that you received from us” (2 Thes 3.6), “the gospel,” “the word of truth” (Col 1.5) “the perfect law, the law of liberty” (Jas 1.25), etc.
 - The basics of this “rule of faith” become crystallized in early creeds, such as the one transmitted by St. Irenaeus (died c. 202) in *Against Heresies* (I:10:1):

The Church, though dispersed through the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith:

[She believes] in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them.

And in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation

And in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord.

And [the Holy Spirit proclaimed] His [future] manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father "to gather all things in one," and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord, and God, and Saviour, and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, "every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess" to Him, and that He should execute just judgment towards all.

[So] that He may send "spiritual wickednesses," and the angels who transgressed and became apostates, together with the ungodly, and unrighteous, and wicked, and profane among men, into everlasting fire; but may, in the exercise of His grace, confer immortality on the righteous, and holy, and those who have kept His commandments, and have persevered in His love, some from the beginning [of their Christian course], and others from [the date of] their repentance, and may surround them with everlasting glory.

- To guard against interpretations that contradict the “rule of faith,” the Scriptures must be interpreted publically with the whole Church

2 Pet 1.20-2.1 – **First of all, you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them.**

- The “Law and the Prophets” are simply “the Christian Scriptures” until roughly 100 AD
 - Christians tend to read the Scriptures in the vernacular, particularly Greek and Aramaic – thus, the Septuagint is prominent
 - It also has some very favorable translations for Christian readings which were a source of infighting between Jews and Christians
 - E.g. “a virgin shall conceive” in Is 7.14 – the Hebrew is ambiguous – so the Hebrew’s “young woman” might or might not be a virgin

The New Writings

- Initially, there is no written “New Testament”
 - But Christians, like the Jews before them, quickly began to compose religious texts in some familiar genres
 - Epistles – Paul’s Romans, 1-2 Corinthians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, etc.; 1-2 Peter, James, Jude, 1 Clement, Ignatius of Antioch’s seven letters, Polycarp to the Philippians, etc.
 - Sermons/Theological Tracts – 1 John, Hebrews, 2 Clement, the “Epistle of Barnabas,” the Didache, “the Epistle to Diognetus,” Melito of Sardis’ “On Pascha,” etc.
 - Apocalypses – Revelation, Apocalypse of Peter, Shepherd of Hermas, etc.
 - And they also invent (or adapt/expand) some new genres
 - Gospel – Matthew, Mark, Luke/Acts, John
 - Martyrdom – the Martyrdom of Polycarp, Acts of Paul and Thekla, etc.
 - Apology – Justin Martyr’s Apologies to the Emperor and “Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew,” Irenaeus’ “Against All Heresies,” etc.
- The “New Testament” books we have today were written between c. 30 AD and c. 100 AD
- At first, no Christian books would have been generally considered “Scripture” like “the Law and the Prophets” were Scripture
 - Christians never produced any literature that they considered to be part of “and the prophets,” even if they wrote books of “prophecy” (e.g. Revelation)
 - Some of the books may have been written by authors who understood themselves as writing a sort of “new Scripture” – e.g. John’s “the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (1.17) or Revelation calling itself “the book of the prophecy” (1.3, cf. 22.10, 19)

- Others, such as Philemon, 2-3 John, are written with obvious apostolic authority, but probably weren't intended by the author to be read in all the Churches as universal "Scripture"
- All of the New Testament books are written to insiders who possess the "rule of faith"
- However, by the early/mid second century, Christian authors are starting to refer to much of what we consider to be the New Testament as "Scripture"
 - And also there is a growing liturgical use of these documents

Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 67 (155-157 AD) – And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.

Early Challenges from Heresies and Heretics

- From nearly the beginning, there were people who perverted "the teaching"
 - Cf. 1 Cor 11.9; 2 Cor 11.13; 2 Pet 2.1; 1 Jn 4.1; Gal 2.4; etc.
 - They started both inside and outside of the Church – but those inside were typically excommunicated when their views became known
 - They also wrote many books
 - E.g. "Gospel of Thomas," "Gospel of Philip," Apocryphon of James, etc.
 - These books would have been quickly understood by the early Church as the writings of outsiders
 - They were never accorded authority in the Church
 - They were not read as a part of early Christian worship
 - When discussion of a closed "canon" of the New Testament came about, they were never discussed as possible inclusions

Irenaeus, "The King and the Fox," *Against Heresies* (174-189 AD) – Such, then, is their [the Valentinians'] system, which neither the prophets announced, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles delivered, but of which they boast that beyond all others they have a perfect knowledge. They gather their views from other sources than the Scriptures; and, to use a common proverb, they strive to weave ropes of sand, while they endeavour to adapt with an air of probability to their own peculiar assertions the parables of the Lord, the sayings of the prophets, and the words of the apostles, in order that their scheme may not seem altogether without support.

In doing so, however, they disregard the order and the connection of the Scriptures, and so far as in them lies, dismember and destroy the truth. By transferring passages, and dressing them up anew, and making one thing out of another, they succeed in deluding many through their wicked art in adapting the oracles of the Lord to their opinions.

Their manner of acting is just as if one, when a beautiful image of a king has been constructed by some skilful artist out of precious jewels, should then take this likeness of the man all to pieces, should rearrange the gems, and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or of a fox, and even that but poorly executed; and should then maintain and declare that this was the beautiful image of the king which the skilful artist constructed, pointing to the jewels which had been admirably fitted together by the first artist to form the image of the king, but have been with

bad effect transferred by the latter one to the shape of a dog, and by thus exhibiting the jewels, should deceive the ignorant who had no conception what a king's form was like, and persuade them that that miserable likeness of the fox was, in fact, the beautiful image of the king. In like manner do these persons patch together old wives' fables, and then endeavour, by violently drawing away from their proper connection, words, expressions, and parables whenever found, to adapt the oracles of God to their baseless fictions. We have already stated how far they proceed in this way with respect to the interior of the Pleroma.

In like manner he also who retains unchangeable in his heart the rule of the truth which he received by means of baptism, will doubtless recognise the names, the expressions, and the parables taken from the Scriptures, but will by no means acknowledge the blasphemous use which these men make of them. For, though he will acknowledge the gems, he will certainly not receive the fox instead of the likeness of the king. But when he has restored every one of the expressions quoted to its proper position, and has fitted it to the body of the truth, he will lay bare, and prove to be without any foundation, the figment of these heretics.

The Challenge of Pious Forgeries and Anonymous Documents

- In the second century, if not before, some Christians started forging documents in the names of the Apostles and other early leaders
 - These proved to be more of a challenge to the Church, since they were theologically Orthodox or nearly Orthodox – thus, people were inclined to want to read some of them in the Churches and ascribe authority to them
 - E.g. the Apocalypse of Peter, the Protoevangelion of James, Ignatius to the Virgin Mary, Ignatius to the Apostle John, the Dionysian Corpus, etc.
 - Many modern secular scholars actually put 1-2 Timothy, Titus, 1-2 Peter, and Revelation in this category
- Many other documents had no name attached to them internally and were being ascribed to the Apostles and other early leaders
 - E.g. Hebrews (Paul), 2 Clement, Epistle of Barnabas, etc.
 - Technically, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, and 1-3 John don't explicitly reveal their authors' identities, either
- By the second century, there was some confusion about which of these new books should hold authority and which should be read authoritatively in Church
 - The eventual resolution of this confusion led to the creation of "the canon" and "the Bible" as we know it